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Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
Fifty-eighth session

Summary record (partial)* of the 1222nd meeting
Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Thursday, 3 July 2014, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Ameline

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* No summary record was prepared for the rest of the meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (*continued*)

Combined second and third periodic reports of Mauritania (continued) (CEDAW/C/MRT/2-3; CEDAW/C/MRT/Q/2-3 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Mauritania took places at the Committee table.*

Articles 7 to 9 (continued)

2. **Ms. Mint Elghotob Ould Moma** (Mauritania) said that, in an attempt to manage the terrorist threat in the regions bordering the Sahara desert, the Government had established a national register for all citizens including visitors to the country. As for the transmission of nationality, the provisions of the Criminal Code and Act No. 61-112 on nationality provided that any children born to a Mauritanian mother and foreign or stateless father acquired Mauritanian nationality and could renounce their nationality upon reaching the age of 18.

3. In regard to women's participation in decision-making roles and representation at the international level, considerable efforts had been made to facilitate women's access to decision-making bodies and achieve equal representation of women in political and public life. As a result, the number of women in political and public office had increased and there were currently around 20 female members of parliament.

4. **Mr. Ould Ely Telmoudy** (Mauritania) said that the number of Malian refugees in Mauritania stood at around 74,000, a large percentage of whom were women and children. All refugees must register as soon as they entered the country and no refugees had been forcibly returned to their country of origin. The Government continued to take measures to improve the conditions in Mbera refugee camp and worked in conjunction with the local authorities to provide adequate drinking water and sanitation facilities. Health services including a maternity and surgical ward had been provided and refugees also had access to medicines and mosquito nets. Adequate food supplies had been made available and specialized nutrition centres had been set up to prevent and treat malnutrition. In addition, basic education was provided to children. National coordination meetings were held on a monthly basis under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior and Decentralization to assess conditions and weekly camp meetings were held to address any urgent issues. To date, no refugees had requested Mauritanian citizenship and most preferred to voluntarily return to their country of origin once it was safe enough to do so.

Articles 10 to 14

5. **Ms. Bailey** asked the delegation to provide further information on measures taken and envisaged to significantly increase female literacy; to reduce the school dropout rate among girls owing to, inter alia, poverty, child marriage and early pregnancy; to eliminate economic, social and cultural obstacles to access to education faced by girls, in particular girls of non-Arab descent, and to eliminate stereotypical attitudes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in textbooks, curricula and teacher training.

6. **Ms. Gbedemah** asked the delegation to confirm whether unregistered children of undocumented migrants had access to education. What efforts been made to implement Act No. 2001-054 on compulsory basic education and enforce the provisions of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act? Lastly, she wished to know what steps had been taken to devise appropriate educational strategies and curricula which responded to the requirements of the public and private labour market.

7. **Ms. Haidar** requested further information on the protection and types of legal, social and other services available to women in the informal sector and measures taken at the school and university level to ensure that women joined the private and public sectors. She also wished to know what measures had been envisaged to reduce the wage gap between women and men as well as the occupational segregation of women in the public and private sectors and to increase the number of women in decision-making positions. Would the State party consider introducing a specific law on sexual harassment to guarantee women's safety and protection in the workplace?

8. **Ms. Nwankwo** asked what specific measures had been envisaged to further address the persistently high rates of maternal mortality, the high number of cases of vesico-vaginal fistula, the lack of access to basic health-care services, including essential obstetric care, and the social and economic obstacles faced by women of non-Arab descent to gaining access to health services.

9. She wished to know whether the draft strategy for health and reproductive health of young people had been finalized and, if so, when it would be implemented. What measures would be taken to increase the availability and accessibility of comprehensive education on sexual and reproductive health and family planning services, particularly for Malian refugees and adolescent girls, and the rate of contraceptive use? Similarly, she requested further information on the implementation and impact of the 2011–2015 national strategic plan to combat HIV/AIDS and the measures taken to increase women's knowledge with regard to prevention of HIV/AIDS. Lastly, she enquired as to the legal status of abortion in Mauritania and asked whether rape, incest and foetal impairment would be introduced as grounds for abortion.

10. **Mr. Diakité** (Mauritania) said that Act No. 2001-054 of 19 July 2001 on compulsory basic education provided for six years of basic education and expenditure on education accounted for around 15 per cent of public spending. The Government had recently devised a new national education policy which aimed to improve the overall quality of education and regular school inspections were carried out. A training scheme for teachers in rural and remote areas had been introduced and school meals and scholarships were provided to disadvantaged pupils. Steps had also been taken to eliminate gender stereotypes and breakdown gender segregation in tertiary education and initiatives to encourage girls to study traditionally male-dominated subjects such as science and mathematics had been launched.

11. **Mr. Ould Ramdane** (Mauritania) said that women were disadvantaged as far as employment was concerned. A number of steps had been taken to remedy the situation, and progress was being made, but it had to be kept in mind that nearly all working women worked in the informal sector, which accounted for a very large share of the State party's economy. In that sector, women created microenterprises, often in their homes. Small shops, hairdressing salons, sewing workshops and even computer training schools were among the most commonly created such businesses. Those businesses were not officially registered, however, and in their determination to keep them off the tax rolls the women who created them were unwitting participants in their own exclusion from the formal labour market.

12. In recent years, the authorities had taken steps to promote access to the labour market. For example, there were now vocational training centres accepting both boys and girls in nearly all the regional capitals; the effects of the establishment of those centres could be seen in women's greater access to the labour market. Although the rates of women in employment were still very low overall, they were beginning to find positions in such sectors as agriculture, retailing, information technology, the civil service, animal husbandry, fishing, mining and transportation. Until quite recently, women had been almost entirely absent from many of those sectors. Many positions held by women were in the

informal sector, but the State party, together with its international partners, was working to address the problems posed by the size of that sector. A social security system specific to the informal sector was being developed, but only gradually, as the sudden introduction of such a system would in all likelihood lead to a good deal of unemployment in a sector that employed large numbers of women.

13. Turning to pay disparities, he said that in the public sector equal pay for men and women was the norm; in the private sector, if a woman was more productive than a man, she would be paid more.

14. **Ms. Mint Elghotob Ould Moma** (Mauritania) said that the data provided to the Committee had been updated since 2010. The point was to show that there had been improvement, not to suggest that the State party was satisfied with the progress that had been made. She also said there was no discrimination against girls of non-Arab descent in Mauritania. Everyone, regardless of origin, had the same rights.

15. Regarding access to schooling, she said that there was nothing preventing a parent from enrolling a child in school. Parents who had failed to register the births of their children needed only to register them for the children to enrol in school, and children without parents could be registered with the help of a judge and then enrol.

16. It was true that educational curricula needed to be re-examined to ensure that they met the needs of the job market. The recently opened vocational training centres would enable their graduates to find employment in positions that suited them. Initiatives to help those students to find jobs had also been given funding. Training centres catering specifically to women's needs were available to women who had never gone to school or who had dropped out at an early age. The aim was to facilitate access to the labour market for those women, and for that purpose funding to help them create businesses had been put at their disposal.

17. **Mr. Telmoudy** (Mauritania) said that the poverty reduction strategy paper, the blueprint for economic and social development in Mauritania, involved four main priorities: growth, poverty reduction, the development of human resources and basic services, and governance. The paper had been revised since its initial conception, and another priority had been added: to combat HIV/AIDS and ensure that prevalence rates remained below 1 per cent.

18. A number of steps had also been taken to reduce the maternal mortality rate, and although the rate was still high — 626 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2011 — it had fallen from 930 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990. Current rates of maternal mortality were unjustifiably high, but they could be explained by the much higher rates of earlier years and the distance that the country had thus had to travel. In that connection, in 2011 the percentage of deliveries that were assisted was nearly twice that of 1990. That increase and the reduction of maternal mortality were correlated. Government budgets were indicative of the seriousness with which the authorities were working to reduce the rates of maternal mortality. In just one year, for example, the budget of the Ministry of Health, as a share of the entire national budget, had increased considerably. In addition, a presidential initiative had been taken in an effort to ensure that the Millennium Development Goals regarding maternal health and child mortality and HIV infection rates were attained. As part of the initiative, an autonomous task force that focused exclusively on the achievement of those Goals had been set up and allocated considerable resources.

19. The aim of the State party's reproductive health policy was to ensure the availability of basic and emergency reproductive health care, personnel qualified to assist with deliveries, medical care in the event of complications and contraceptives. The policy also addressed female genital mutilation, infertility and HIV/AIDS. A related event, the

National Reproductive Health Week, was sponsored by the First Lady. The first class to enter the State party's first medical school would also be graduating in 2014.

20. Another development was the introduction of an insurance scheme for women. The aim was to pool risks. For a modest sum (the equivalent of roughly €14), the scheme would give women access to a comprehensive range of medical services relating to pregnancy. The insurance scheme had contributed greatly to the considerable increase in the percentage of assisted deliveries. Mother-to-child transmission of HIV and problems relating to obstetric fistulas were also being addressed.

21. In its efforts to achieve its goals in respect of maternal health, child mortality and HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, the State party had invested considerable sums in equipping hospitals and health centres, providing neonatal services, acquiring ambulances and distributing malaria tests and mosquito nets. Special aid had also been given to villages selected by community health-care workers in the five regions most severely affected by child and maternal mortality.

22. Regarding the national strategy for child survival, he said that it was not a strategy specific to Mauritania. It had been adopted with success in such countries as Ghana and Benin, and it was expected to contribute to a reduction of child mortality in Mauritania as well.

23. The fight against HIV/AIDS in Mauritania was overseen by a high-level National Commission to Combat AIDS. Antiretroviral therapy was available, and considerable resources had been allotted to the prevention of mother-to-child transmission. Overall HIV prevalence rates in the State party were comparatively low; however, those rates varied considerably from one region of the country to another.

24. **Ms. Mint Boide** (Mauritania) wished only to add that combating maternal mortality required a multisectoral approach. The mere existence of health infrastructure did not suffice. For that reason, the Government had trained local women to relay information about the health services available to the members of their communities.

25. **Ms. Zou** Xiaoqiao said that because Mauritania had offered no information on the subject, she wished to know more about legislation and policies concerning women's access to credit. She also wished to know what problems women faced in that respect and what efforts the Government had made to help women gain access to credit. She requested data on the share of bank loans granted to men as compared to women. She was pleased to note the Government's efforts regarding microfinance but wondered what steps had been or would be taken to expand the limited coverage of the microfinance system in order to ensure that more women, in particular those from disadvantaged groups, enjoyed the clear benefits of that system.

26. Turning to the retirement age, she noted that men in Mauritania retired at age 60 and women at 55. She wondered whether women's pensions reflected the fewer years that they spent in the workforce. If that five-year difference resulted in income differences, what would be done to narrow the gap? Lastly, she wished to know the extent to which women, particularly those from disadvantaged groups or remote regions, were involved in cultural activities. Were there limitations to their participation in cultural or social activities or sports? Had libraries or cultural centres giving women the opportunity to take part in such activities been established?

27. **Ms. Pomeranzi** said that she understood that the problems facing women in Mauritania were more severe still for the 70 per cent of Mauritanian women living in rural areas of the country. She knew that the Government was aware of the situation, as the periodic report itself had noted that ownership of land was still problematic, even though no law discriminated against women in that regard. The Committee was especially concerned

about the situation of women from the Haratine community, who were not only rural but also nomadic. They worked for their masters in oases in the north of the country and were slaves in all but name. In 2009 the Government had developed a plan to improve the situation of women in rural areas. She thus wished to know what the plan had achieved, especially with respect to the situation of women from the Haratine community and from the minority groups in the south of the country. Did rural women face multiple forms of discrimination? What steps had been taken in view of their plight? How had the Government dealt with the situation in respect of access to credit and landownership?

28. **Ms. Mint Elghotob Ould Moma** (Mauritania) said that men and women had equal access to microcredit and enjoyed equal treatment by banks. Interest-free credits would be granted to women during the current year to help them to establish small businesses and the amounts granted could be increased in future years. A bill that was expected to be passed later in the year would make the retirement age and pension the same for men and women. With regard to property rights, land lots had been distributed to vulnerable families and many women had become landowners in recent years.

29. **Mr. Tourad Ould Abdel Malick** (Mauritania) said that Mauritanian law ensured universal access to landownership, with no discrimination against women or minorities. Haratine women were not enslaved; they were remunerated for their work in the informal sector.

30. **Ms. Al-Jehani**, recalling that the Convention stipulated equality between men and women in both the public and private domains, called on Mauritania to review its specific reservation concerning article 16. In the Committee's concluding comments, the State party had been urged to accelerate its reform of civil and family law to ensure equal rights. She would appreciate further details of the follow-up to the State party's 10-year study of the implementation of the Personal Status Code referred to in the replies to the list of issues and asked what practical measures had been and would be taken to bring civil and family law into line with the requirements for gender equality set out in the Convention and the Constitution. Recognizing that the family unit was valued highly in sharia law, she said that gender equality must be strengthened in the private realm in order to promote it in the public realm. Forty-three per cent of Mauritanian women married before the age of 18 and a large percentage before the age of 15. The State party should consider ways of ensuring that marriage was in the interest of the persons in question and not their guardians or parents. What urgent legal steps were being taken in order to deal with the dangerous situations that resulted from cases of child marriage? She also highlighted the link between forced marriage and slavery. In many cases, marriages to foreigners or civil marriages were not recognized. Was that an attempt to stop women from marrying or a negative result of their submission to the rule of guardians? Lastly, the civil status law should be amended so that the right of women to enjoy and dispose of property freely, in keeping with both the Convention and sharia law, was upheld.

31. **Mr. Ould Ramdane** (Mauritania) recalled that the preamble to the Constitution stated that the family was a fundamental element of Mauritanian society and protected by the State. It was also traditional for Islamic States to grant protection to women. Under the provisions of the Personal Status Code relating to early marriage, violations of the minimum age for marriage were subject to criminal penalties. Judges could dissolve early marriages if they were against the wishes and interests of the female spouse and award compensation. Women had rights over their own personal property and were free to leave up to one third of their assets to an individual of their choice in their will if they so wished. Moreover, the Code stipulated that a man could not prevent his wife from working, studying or travelling. Mauritania was trying to respect contemporary realities; women constituted more than half of the population and their potential could not be overlooked. Procedures would be established to apply the Personal Status Code in law and in practice.

With regard to the reservation concerning article 16, he said that the country was moving towards equal rights but must respect social and cultural trends and move gradually to change mindsets.

32. **Ms. Al-Jehani** said that many other countries governed by sharia law had advanced family rights and Mauritania should do the same. She emphasized her concerns over the prevalence of early marriage despite the law against it and said that the State party must look at how the law was applied. She would appreciate details of the results of the revision of family law which had been discussed for more than 10 years.

33. **Mr. Ould Ramdane** (Mauritania) said that the study of the Personal Status Code had shown that it was not fundamentally problematic. The law worked in two ways — it either adapted to the needs of society as it evolved or it encouraged society to move forward — but it had to conform to the realities of Mauritanian society.

34. **Ms. Mint Elghotob Ould Moma** (Mauritania) said that the early marriage statistics that had been cited were out of date. Current figures were much lower and efforts were being made to further reduce them. Her Government was working towards withdrawing its general reservation to the Convention, but required time in order to do so without contradicting sharia law. Mauritania was a moderate Sunni country and Islamic teachings did not fundamentally limit freedoms. However, the extremist elements that could arise from Islam did, and must be combated.

35. **Ms. Gabr** said she recognized that Mauritania was committed to sharia law. While it was true that the country had made progress, she hoped that it would continue to study best practices in other Sunni Muslim countries, most of which had adopted the Convention without reservations.

36. **Ms. Al-Jehani** said that there was no contradiction between sharia law and the rights of women. She emphasized the importance of openness and reiterated that there were many best practices to study. While social and cultural issues should be taken into account, the country must nevertheless move forward. What was being done to inform and educate people in order to create a forward-looking attitude without sacrificing the basic tenets of Islam?

37. **Mr. Traoré** (Mauritania) welcomed the opportunity to have such constructive dialogue in a spirit of openness and thanked the Committee for its cooperation. The process highlighted the progress made since the previous meeting with the Committee, as well as the challenges that remained. Considerable measures had been adopted to eliminate discrimination against women, which had made it possible to improve women's status and give men and women an equal stake in development. However, the moral and customary principles of Mauritanian society sometimes lagged behind the principles of the Constitution and the Convention, leading to legislative inconsistencies. The education that people received was not always sufficient to allow them to embrace change. The Government would continue to focus on the empowerment of women and the elimination of gender-based violence. Mauritania was committed to pursuing reforms for the protection and promotion of human rights; the replacement of the general reservation with express reservations represented some progress in that respect. Lastly, he noted that the Government looked forward to receiving assistance from the international community for the implementation of the Committee's recommendations.

38. **Ms. Mint Elghotob Ould Moma** (Mauritania) said that her Government would continue to work to change mindsets and eliminate the obstacles to the full enjoyment of rights by women.

39. **The Chairperson** thanked the delegation for the information provided during the day and the efforts made to respond to the Committee's questions. She was pleased to hear

that the previous meetings with the Committee had facilitated progress and that there was a focus on combating discrimination and violence. While the removal of the general reservation was positive, the Committee would be grateful if the State party would also consider removing its specific reservations. Lastly, she noted the concern relating to technical assistance.

The discussion covered in the summary record ended at 5.00 p.m.